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INFO RUEHFK/AMCONSUL FUKUOKA PRIORITY 6913
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RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE PRIORITY 0731
RUEHKS/AMCONSUL SAPPORO PRIORITY 7425
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6828
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RULSDMK/DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/J, EEB/TRA FOR DAS BYERLY
STATE PASS TRANSPORTATION FOR B. PELLETIER AND K. GLATZ
STATE PASS COMMERCE FOR K. ROTH AND D. BARZDUKAS
STATE PASS USTR FOR M. BEEMAN

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR RAISES AVIATION AND RAIL WITH JAPAN'S
TRANSPORT MINISTER

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James P. Zumwalt,
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Japan's Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Seiji Maehara, who is also State Minister for Okinawa and Space Minister, seemed intent on discussing only alliance and Okinawa-related issues during his initial meeting with the Ambassador October 14. When pressed, however, Minister Maehara did make brief mention of key transportation issues in his portfolio, including Japan's desire to export its high-speed rail expertise and plans to assist Japan Airlines (JAL), the nation's legacy flag carrier. Ministry officials separately conveyed to us their frustration at the Maehara's apparent disregard for prepared talking points, a further indication that the heretofore cozy relationship between politicians and bureaucrats may be a thing of the past under the new ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). End summary.

¶2. (C) In an October 14 meeting with the Ambassador, Japan's Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Seiji Maehara touched cursorily on the broad scope of his Ministry's work -- waterways, maritime, roads, tourism, rail, aviation, and residential areas -- but clearly was more interested in alliance and Okinawa issues during the 30-minute meeting (reported septel). (Maehara is also State Minister for Okinawa, Northern Territories and Disaster Prevention and Space Minister.)

¶3. (C) When asked about Japan's interest in exporting its high-speed rail know-how, Maehara emphasized Japan's bullet train's safety and stated he would be pleased if the United States adopts Japan's system.

¶4. (C) With regard to ailing Japan Airlines (JAL), Minister Maehara suggested JAL's restructuring plan may be finalized sooner than expected. (Note: Shortly after taking office, Minister Maehara established a task force charged with oversight of JAL's restructuring, replacing the study group convened by the former ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The task force is expected to release its findings by the end of October. End note.) Despite damaging rumors that led financial institutions to temporarily suspend credit for the beleaguered airline, JAL's flight plans have not been adversely affected, Maehara claimed. He noted both Prime Minister Hatoyama and he had expressed their willingness to "back up" the airline, and that JAL has his "full support."

Comment:

15. (C) Despite attendance at the meeting by more than 20 Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) officials, Maehara seemed determined to focus on the broader bilateral issues related to the alliance. After the meeting, an Assistant Vice Minister commented separately that "our minister speaks with his own words," observing that Maehara spoke freely with apparent disregard for talking points developed by MLIT bureaucrats -- a statement later confirmed by a second MLIT official. This same official also expressed exasperation with Minister Maehara's recent public comments on Haneda Airport's internationalization and other related matters, confiding that she "hopes he has a brain" on aviation matters. Concerns like these suggest that more work remains to close the gap between the DPJ political leadership and GOJ bureaucrats, at least at MLIT, who appear to no longer be calling the shots.

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